



Do You Really Know That Weapon is

About a year ago, then Sergeant Major of the Army Jack Tilley published an article in *Countermeasure* magazine discussing negligent weapons discharges. It's time to revisit this serious issue. Since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism, 25 Soldiers have died and another 14 have suffered permanent disabilities because of negligent weapons discharges. In almost every case, it was another member of the Soldier's unit who was responsible. How tragic to survive the battlefield only to be shot by your battle buddy! Who is the real enemy?

Some think these numbers are relatively low, but I'm here to tell you even one is unacceptable and we, as leaders, can't stand for it. We must identify the problem, establish solutions, and train our Soldiers so we'll never have to tell another family member their loved one died because of "friendly fire." Accidental or negligent discharge—call it whatever you want—is a core safety issue I am focusing on as Sergeant Major of the Army.

Many of these discharges occurred in base camps or areas where the weapons control status was "green" except for Soldiers in a security role. So

what went wrong in these incidents?

In almost every case Soldiers didn't follow established procedures on when, where, and how to clear their weapons. We call these procedures "standards." You'll find clearing barrels at the entrances of compounds and base camps, at the base of guard towers, and at helipads. Clearing barrels are the focal point for leaders such as OICs, NCOICs, and convoy commanders to ensure their Soldiers' weapons are cleared and in green status.

In one incident a Soldier was shot and killed in his tent because another Soldier didn't clear his weapon when his team returned from a mission. Peeling the onion a little more, we found this Soldier was riding in the back of a truck with several other Soldiers and was asleep during the clearing process. These Soldiers weren't required to dismount the truck, so instead they handed their weapons to another Soldier on the ground to clear them. Unfortunately, one weapon—the one involved in the shooting—was missed. In this incident, unit leaders failed to hold Soldiers responsible for clearing their weapons and NCOs responsible for supervising the process. The result of leaders not enforcing standards and

allowing Soldiers to become complacent was the needless death of a young Soldier.

In another incident a Soldier was killed when he was shot in the head by a 25 mm cannon on an M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV). The deceased Soldier and another Soldier were standing approximately 20 feet in front of the BFV, which was positioned on the unit perimeter for security operations. The crew kept the 25 mm cannon loaded, with the "ghost round" cycled. The BFV was unmanned until the driver entered the vehicle to start the engine. When he switched on the MASTER POWER switch, the 25 mm cannon cycled and fired a round, killing the Soldier. The other Soldier was severely wounded in the neck by a discarding petal from the projectile.

How if Loaded?

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I told this story while visiting troops stationed around Iraq and asked them if they would ever stand in front of a loaded weapon on a range. In every case the answer was "Never!" We must emphasize that we train as we are going to fight.

In this incident, unit leaders allowed Soldiers to become complacent about the potential danger associated with weapons orientation. Unit leaders did not enforce keeping loaded crew-served or vehicle-mounted weapons manned at all times.

I love to watch seasoned Soldiers and leaders moving along a busy city street. Seasoned Soldiers know their weapons are lethal and ensure their muzzles are never pointed at anyone as they move among the populace. These Soldiers instinctively practice muzzle awareness all the time.

When in the ready position, seasoned Soldiers keep their trigger finger poised alongside their weapon's magazine well and off the trigger until they need, or anticipate the need, to shoot. How do Soldiers become seasoned and skilled? The answer is training and experience.

Training enforces important disciplines such

as muzzle awareness and trigger finger position. Leaders must teach and enforce the right standards and never allow Soldiers to become complacent in weapons handling. Weapons handling is a perishable skill. Repetitive focused training builds experience, creating Soldiers who are inherently safe.

Long periods of time between training events or during combat operations (when it might be hard to train) can lead to complacency. Recurring focused training on weapons handling and unit standing operating procedures can combat complacency and reinforce established standards. We need the discipline of first-line leaders along with the oversight of senior leaders to halt these needless, tragic deaths.


Negligent discharges often happen because of the reasons listed below:

- Lack of muzzle awareness and discipline
- Insufficient training
- Ineffective supervision
- Negligence
- Inattentiveness
- Indiscipline

These same reasons caused nine Soldiers to be killed or seriously wounded while cleaning their weapons. Soldiers not clearing their weapons and maintaining a weapons control green status in designated areas killed or wounded 18 others. Twelve Soldiers were injured or killed because of a lack of muzzle awareness and discipline, coupled with unintentionally pulling the trigger. Learn the standard, teach the standard, and enforce the standard.

I've learned during the last year that if a unit doesn't have well-established standards and discipline before they deploy to Afghanistan, Iraq, or the Balkans, they'll have a tough time establishing standards once they're there. Ultimately, it's Soldiers who pay the price in needless deaths and accidents.

Weapons proficiency is the province of the NCO. From the youngest corporal to the Sergeant Major of the Army, we're the primary trainers and guardians of the standard. Competence is our watchword. Our young Soldiers look to us for an example to follow.

The Soldiers we train today will be tomorrow's leaders; just as today's leaders will be tomorrow's senior leaders. We must give our Soldiers and leaders the tools, techniques, and procedures to prepare them for that task. I need your help! 

Hooah!